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SUBJECT: A LOOK AT AZERBAIJAN,S SECRETIVE, SHI,A VILLAGE OF
NARDARAN

REF: 07 BAKU 01043

Classified By: DCM Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Nardaran, a conservative village of 7,000 residents on Azerbaijan,s Absheron peninsula is routinely cited as a restive, Shi,a hotbed of Iranian influence. Yet according to a Nardaran resident, village elders are the center of authority within Nardaran, not Tehran. The resident said the majority of protests in Nardaran occur after the elders hold deliberation sessions, which are open to village residents, to plan for a public response to a particular issue. The resident said the Azerbaijan Islamic Party takes advantage of these deliberation sessions and protests to gain publicity. Embassy contacts also report the protests increasingly appear to focus on political -- vice socioeconomic -- grievances, including disagreement with U.S. foreign policy. In the long term, historically religious communities such as Nardaran may broaden the pool of younger Muslims who are susceptible to a politicized Islamic message that views the GOAJ as illegitimate. End Summary.

Scarce Reliable Information on Nardaran

12. (C) The religiously conservative village of Nardaran, located on the Absheron Peninsula approximately 25 kilometers from Baku, has been an enigma of sorts for Azerbaijanis and outside observers. The village's level of religious observance -- which is quite high by Azerbaijani standards, the question of whether Iran exerts some level of control over the village, and its level of autonomy from the central government are questions that interest local and foreign commentators alike. Driving into the village of approximately 7,000 residents, one can see citations from the Koran on the city walls and probably at least thirty percent of the women wear the chador (full length outer garment). The village contains one of Azerbaijan's largest mosques, which houses the reported remains of the sister or wife of the seventh imam. The village has also been the scene of several violent confrontations between residents and authorities, particularly in June 2002 when one resident was killed in a clash with police and in a January 2006 shootout that killed one resident and two police officers.

13. (C) The Embassy has spoken with a variety of local contacts to learn more about the village. While local commentators are happy to share their opinion on dynamics within Nardaran, this is a small, insular community that is

unlikely to share valuable information with anyone but trusted, regular contacts. Accordingly, we judge that many of our contacts' information is speculative and based on limited access to the village. Given this restraint, the Embassy information below is largely based on the views of a Nardaran resident (Ali Nurmammadov), which are supplemented by the views of a journalist (Kenan Guliyev), who is not a resident, but who has covered religious issues and had personal relations with several of the village's elders. The latter proved his bona fides by arranging a lunch for Embassy officers with several of the village's elders in May 2007. Both Nurmammadov and Guliyev were recent International Visitor Program participants, underscoring the value this program provides for the Embassy's outreach and reporting efforts.

Iranian Influence Real, but Overblown

¶4. (C) Nurmammadov told us the center of authority within Nardaran lies with the village elders, who he described as "well educated" and exposed to world events. Nurmammadov dismissed the idea that the village elders are isolated from the world in a hermetically-sealed village; rather, they closely follow events in the broader Muslim world. On the question of Iranian influence, Nurmammadov said some residents support and are inspired by Iran's theocratic system, but the village elders are "not the tool of Tehran."

¶5. (C) On the question of Iranian influence within the village, most commentators believe the majority of the population is culturally or religiously predisposed to be inspired by Iran, but there is a broad spectrum of views on

BAKU 00000310 002 OF 003

how directly Iran may be involved in the community. The Embassy judges that Iranian presence is felt on the ground, particularly from a cultural, historical (a chunk of Nardaran residents are originally from northern Iran and came to the village during the first oil boom before the Soviet period), and religious perspective. We do not know, however, how actively Iranian intelligence agents may be involved in Nardaran.

What's Behind the Protests?

¶6. (C) Over the past years, there have been a variety of demonstrations in Nardaran. The protests typically grow out of a specific local grievance or to show solidarity with the broader Muslim world. Over the past few years, it appears that the majority of protests are in the latter category. For example, protests in the past few years have been linked to the destruction of the Al-Askariya mosque's golden dome in Samarra, Iraq; the U.S. and Israeli presence and role in the Middle East; the Danish cartoon depicting Muhammad; an Azerbaijani journalist who wrote an article criticizing Islam; and Quds Day. Nurmammadov told us that while socioeconomic grievances -- such as limited gas, electricity, or water -- triggered protests in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s, most residents have had regular access to these utilities since 2005. Nurmammadov said the most immediate driver for the majority of recent protests is opposition to U.S. foreign policy. Several other commentators have reported the village leadership increasingly is politicized and more inclined to protest against the U.S. and more broadly, the West. While this is probably true, the Embassy notes that anti-U.S. protests have occurred in Nardaran since at least the early 1990s.

¶7. (C) Nurmammadov said the demonstrations are not spontaneous, and that community and mosque leaders often assemble to deliberate on a communal response to a particular issue. Nurmammadov referred to these deliberation meetings as "open sessions," where any resident can voice his/her opinion. Nurmammadov observed that this type of format often

leads to the politicization of an issue, as some citizens like to stir up a particular issue to gain attention. Underscoring how residents are proud of their ability to hold such deliberations and protests, during a spring lunch with Nardaran elders, one resident proudly declared that Nardaran is a place "that stands up for its rights."

¶18. (C) Nurmammadov said members of the Azerbaijani Islamic Party often take advantage of these deliberations or the demonstrations to air their views. Nurmammadov observed that no prominent party leaders live in Nardaran, but party supporters probably live in the village. (The Azerbaijani Islamic Party was primarily active in the mid and late 1990s; it is generally believed to be supported by Iran and does not enjoy any significant public support. In 2007, it elected a new chair, Movsum Samadov, who has not been responsive to our requests for a meeting.

Miscellaneous Tidbits

¶19. (C) Nurmammadov said there are four or five active mosque communities in Nardaran, each with their own imam and congregation. Nurmammadov said relations between these communities are "cooperative." Asked about the funding for the large mosque, Guliyev said the money came from a variety of sources, including local residents, outside visitors who come to the mosque as a pilgrimage site, rich businessmen, and probably some unofficial Iranian money. Guliyev estimated that pilgrims left 100 - 200 USD at the holy site per day.

¶110. (C) When asked how important the mujtahid system was for Nardarani residents, Nurmammadov said it is important for practical, everyday rituals. He identified Ayatollahs Lenkorani (died in June 2007), Sistani, and Khomeini as the most important sources of theological guidance for Nardarani residents.

¶111. (C) Many commentators we spoke with referred to Nardaran as a "closed community," and highlighted the central

BAKU 00000310 003 OF 003

government's lack of control over the village. A host of Azerbaijanis have told us they feel uncomfortable going to Nardaran because they are viewed as "outsiders." Nardaran's routine ability to hold protests without government permission is in stark contrast to the opposition and civil society's inability to hold demonstrations in other parts of the country. The Embassy also observes that in 2002, government officials were unable or unwilling to enter Nardaran for several months after rioting in June 2002, suggesting Nardaran's relative autonomy from the center.

Comment

¶12. (S/NF) Local contacts' observation that protests in Nardaran increasingly are political in nature -- vice arising from socioeconomic grievances -- is a point of concern. While Nardaran remains an anomaly in terms of the level of religious observance, there are a number of conservative Shia villages on the Absheron Peninsula that we continue to monitor (reftel). In the short-term, our concern is that extremists could organize in small villages where central control is limited, as suggested by GRPO reporting. In the long-term, we worry that the GOAJ's inability or unwillingness to encourage authentic, indigenous Islamic institutions and actors -- apart from the Caucasus Muslim Board, which is largely viewed as illegitimate by observant Muslims in the Absheron villages -- in these historically religious communities may broaden the pool of younger Muslims who are susceptible to a politicized Islamic message that views the GOAJ as illegitimate.

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